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# LET ME THINK

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By H. A. Overstreet

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**To My Wife**

Whose hand and mind have been at work  
on so many pages of this book that I call  
the book my own only because she insists.



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## CHAPTER I

### OUR MANY-POWERED MINDS

WHEN I was a boy, I was fascinated by a special kind of tool that we used to see in the windows of hardware stores. It had a hollow wooden handle that held within it a dozen or more attachments. Usually, in the display window, these attachments were shown spilling out of the head of the handle —screw-driver, chisel, gimlet, auger, awl, and a glittering lot of others. The tool was always an amazement to me. I never got over the delight of beholding so many things in so small a space and of seeing how, in a jiffy, you could put on one attachment or another. It was in itself a whole workshop, with all the fittings at hand.

Many a time I flattened my nose against a store window and wished I could buy one. But a whole arsenal of tools like that was something a kid could not hope to own. I should have to grow up first.

In later years, with the easy assurance of a grown-up, I bought one of them, took it home, and satisfied my boyhood longing to put on the attachments and take them off, to gouge with the gouger, chisel with the chiseler, bore holes with the hole-borer.

I have not laid hands on the gadget for a long time, but the feel and the fascination of it have remained with me. So much so that when I think of human beings, particularly of their minds, I am apt to compare them with this splendid tool.

Here am I, myself. I carry a head on my shoulders. It might seem unkind to that head to say that it is like a hollow wooden handle, but I am willing to put up with the unkindness for the rest of what comes into the picture. Inside my head I have a whole arsenal of attachments. Perhaps it would be better to say. I can use my mind in as many different ways as there are tools in a kit. My mind, with my memories, my habits, my skills, that have been developed by life and education, I use as a whole. But for every different thing I wish to do I can turn it into a different piece of equipment, a living tool for accomplishing my purpose.

I am at a baseball game. I use my mind as something we might call an onlooker. For an hour or more I keep it glued to the game. During some of the heated moments, when angry words and other things are being thrown into the diamond, I make use of another capacity—and tell the umpire what I think of him.

After a while I leave the game and go home. I take off my hat and hang it in the closet. As I close the

door, I notice, for the dozenth time, that it refuses to snap shut. The dozenth time is one too many. Thereupon I call on another power of my mind. It has become my "trouble shooter." I concentrate on the door with all the ingenuity I can command until I have put the lock into shape.

Later a guest arrives for dinner. He is an intelligent fellow, but opinionated. During dinner he says a number of things that to me seem foolish. My mind becomes a weapon—keen as a blade. I go at him with arguments that I think will lay him low. He goes at me. We have a grand fight.

In the course of the argument, however, he says some things that stump me. So, before I go to bed, I decide that I had better straighten out my ignorance. I use my mind to reach out for help. In my bookcase is a volume I think will give me the facts I need to know. I take out the book, get the facts. Now I shall not be quite so much at a loss when those matters come up again.

When I think of the human mind in this way, I get the same amazed feeling I used to have as I looked at the tool in the store window. Our minds are tools of many uses and many powers. Thus, when we see an object that is strange or puzzling, we can investigate and proceed to find out what the thing is and

how it works. Or, wanting to size up some doubtful situation in order to decide what attitude to take, we can use our "judgment."

Having settled the matter, we may get up and take a walk. As we turn the corner and look back at the house, we may notice that the shrubs in front of the windows have an unsightly look. We change swiftly from thinker to artist. What can we do to those shrubs to make them look better? We go back and get out shears and pruning knife and set to work.

We reenter our house and, by another swift change, begin to use our mental powers, our kit of tools, just to enjoy ourselves in our own company. We settle down in a chair in front of a fire and think about things, think about them for no other reason than that they are good to think about.

I am not sure in how many ways we can switch from one power of the mind to another. I doubt whether anyone has ever been able to determine. But it seems to be true that the delight of having a mind is in using it.

I once found one of the tools I described on a rubbish heap in a back lot. I picked it up hopefully, but it was a sad wreck of a tool. The rain had soaked the handle until it had cracked, and the two or three attachments that remained were hopelessly rusted and blunted. We have all met minds like that—cracked, rusted, useless. Life may have made them that way,

for life has its cruelties. Or these minds may have helped to make themselves that way. It is never easy to tell. In the presence of such human failures, we get the almost painful conviction that a sound and happily working mind is the best thing we humans possess. When it goes, there is nothing much left of us.

The powers of the mind, like tools, are never well cared for unless they are used. Again, lack of practice causes us to lose the skill in using our minds that we may have developed at great pains, just as one can grow awkward with tools he once handled deftly. But unlike tools of metal, the mind becomes sharper and more effective with use, instead of dulled and worn. The more we make intelligent use of the various powers of our mind, the better the whole mind becomes, and the greater is the pleasure of using it.

But most people have little leisure to study their minds and the problem of making the most of them; they are too busy making a living to think of ways to make life better. I do not claim greater wisdom than other men, but it is my profession to think and find out about these things. I have, therefore, written this book about our mind, and the many ways in which we can use and enjoy it to make life full, clear up to the very end.

## CHAPTER II

### WE LET THE WORLD IN

WHEN a high board wall was built around the construction site of a new building in Pittsburgh, the director of the work had windows cut in the fence so that people could see what was going on. I do not know the man who ordered the windows cut, but I would trust his sense of humor and his understanding of the human race. Apparently, he feels inside himself some of the curious and quite illogical impulses that the rest of us feel, and he grants us the right to obey them.

It does not seem to make sense that we humans should feel a real discomfort when we are on the outside of a blank wall, unable to see what is happening on the inside. But, strangely enough, we are like that.

A few days ago I stood in a crowd, watching a huge steam derrick reach down into the hidden cavities of a new subway and lift out mouthfuls of stone. As a matter of fact, I was on my way to an appointment, and a guilty glance at my watch told me I dared not linger long. But the drama of the thing was too tempting to miss. On one side of me, staring as I

stared, was a trim man with a mustache and spectacles and a brief case. On the other side was a man who, I thought, might be one of the city's unemployed—a tired man and discouraged. What the three of us would have found in common if we had been put into a room together and left to talk, I have no idea. Many things, perhaps. Perhaps almost nothing at all. But we all wanted to stand and watch while the age-old bones of earth were dragged from their resting place, lifted high in air, and dropped into a waiting truck. Three men—looking.

There is here something very like the tug that makes plants grow upward toward the sun, and the earth's pull that draws their roots downward. Without quite knowing why, we are drawn aside from our path to look at something going on. The only difference between human and plant is that the human can, if he is strong-willed enough, resist the tug; the plant cannot.

In one of Robert Frost's poems a man who collects the money for subscriptions to a country newspaper describes the strange habit his mare, Jemima, has acquired from much turning in at scattered farms: She turns in at every house, "as if she had some sort of curvature," even at places where he has no errand. Most of us are like Jemima. We mean to keep going straight about our business, but when there are things to see, we have a "curvature" of our inten-

tions. Because there are so many things to see, and because we like to look, we travel through life, not by a straight path, but zigzag.

This capacity to be interested in things that have nothing to do with our own practical affairs shows up in all kinds of ways. Last summer I was visiting on a fruit farm in California. At the supper table, one evening, the talk was all of crops and prices. It was not exactly cheerful talk. The farmer was caught, like all his neighbors—like farmers all over the country—in the economic puzzle that makes it bad luck to have a good crop: good crop, poor price.

After supper, the farmer stepped out to the back porch and suddenly called to us: "Come look at the moon!" We went. And the whole group of us stood there, watching an enormous orange moon come up directly behind a black pine tree. We watched it swing clear of the tree and into open sky where, as it climbed, it grew smaller and whiter.

What peculiar power was in that rising moon to jerk the farmer free from his baffled struggle with crops and prices and make him able suddenly to stand serene in a serene universe? What was it that held us all together there, all at one in our enjoyment of a beauty to which we could attach no practical importance? Here was another case of a kind of curvature especially human. From the straight-line effort to

make ends meet, the farmer, and we in his company, pulled aside to look at the moon.

I think of the times I have exerted myself mightily to climb a mountain, and at the top have done nothing to make the climb worth while, except to stand and look. And the odd part of it is that the chance to stand and look has never seemed a poor reward of the effort.

The old song about the bear that went over the mountain seems to imply that his journey ended in disappointment.

The other side of the mountain  
Was all that he could see.

But who are we to say that seeing the other side of the mountain was not a very satisfactory experience? Who has not looked at some horizon's limit and wanted to see beyond it? Which of us has not felt that it would be worth a good deal of effort to catch sight of the view of hills and fields, roads and rivers, that is hidden from us?

I am inclined to think the bear, having made his journey, lumbered once more down the side of his familiar hill, pretty well content with what he had done.

This begins to sound like an autobiography in terms of looking. But I suppose no one of us can tell,

except from his own experience, that there is human value in simply taking in the world around him.

I recall, therefore, another incident. On a summer morning—very early, before other sightseers were around—my wife and I drove out from Cambridge to Concord, to the site of the historic bridge where the Massachusetts farmers faced the redcoats in the first battle of the American Revolution. Somehow I had never visualized that historic battlefield as a place of such rural peace. As we leaned on the bridge rail and looked, Concord River meandered slowly below us. There were weeping willows along its bank; water hyacinths and rushes grew as placidly as in a pond; red-winged blackbirds were streaks of motion across a scene where nothing stirred.

As we looked down into the water, one or the other of us—I do not now know which—noticed something we had never noticed before: Part of the enchantment of trees reflected in water is that we see in the water the underside of the leaves. Those pale undersides, almost never visible to us when we go walking our normal way around the earth, change and soften the whole color of the picture.

This, perhaps, is a very little thing to have noticed, or perhaps it is old news to everyone but myself; but ever since that morning I have found that when I look down into water I expect something new. It is as if down there I could glimpse a hidden half of

plants and trees that in their upright, earth-rooted forms show another half. Just as sometimes we see a friend in an unexpected situation and get an entirely fresh idea of his personality, so in the water's mirror I can look at familiar trees with surprise.

Again, I remember walking through the woods with a friend. I was seeing—or at least I thought I was seeing—the world around us. But suddenly my friend stooped down and, picking up a piece of almost rotten bark from a fallen tree, pointed to a delicate fungus growth.

“Look at this. Here—just a minute.”

He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a folding magnifying glass and handed it to me.

“Hold it there in that patch of sunlight and look at the fungus. Did you ever see a more intricate design than that, or a more beautiful shading of colors?”

It was as if he had opened a door and said to me:

“Here, come on into the world I live in.”

I stood enchanted and absorbed as, through the magnifying glass, I looked upon the beauty of that piece of fungus—a fluted ivory shell with shadings of coral that the naked eye would not suspect. My clumsy feet had tramped upon loveliness that my eyes were too dull to see. For the moment the experience made me hesitate to take a step. I hardly knew where to put down my foot in a world so full of things to be looked at instead of crushed.

According to the census, one hundred and thirty millions of us share the territory called the United States. It makes sense to talk in that fashion whenever we are considering problems that concern all of us. When we talk in terms of food supply, the building of roads, or the zoning of cities, we have to talk as if we all lived in the same environment. When it comes, however, to the more subtle experiences that distinguish one person from another, each of us lives in a world of his own.

Sometimes we say this and feel that the phrase has an infinitely lonely sound. It seems to mean that each of us stands apart from each other person and tries, not very successfully, to bridge the gap between. But the separateness I am speaking of here is not that of loneliness.

When a group of hikers comes out of the woods to a bare hilltop and stands looking off across the valley below, it is hardly possible that any two of them will really see exactly the same details of the scene, or will be reminded of exactly the same past experiences. But this does not mean that each one stands in dreary aloneness. Instead, each will be enjoying the high human privilege of making out of the common world a private world which he may enjoy by himself, or describe so that others may enjoy it also.

Until I went on that walk with my friend, the world that I lived in, the world to which I made a

conscious response, simply did not include the delicate, ivory-colored fungus to which he introduced me. Now it is in my world—it and a whole flock of its relatives that I have since taken time to notice because of this first experience.

My world was empty of steam shovels until I had actually seen one taking bites out of the earth. Now steam shovels are in my world. Those parts of earth to which we have never paid any attention are powerless to fill our minds with images, or influence our behavior. But every time we stop to look at something we have never paid attention to before, we add to the size of the world we do our real living in. From that minute forth and forevermore, there is in our world one more thing we respond to by an emotion or an action—or by both.

One of the chief differences among people is the difference in the size and quality of the world they have made for themselves by selecting the objects of their attention. There are people who see only the rough shapes of things, among which nothing subtle or delicate has any place. There are people who see beyond what is crude and obvious to what is intricate and far-reaching. And there are people all the way between these two extremes.

There are people who say that the world is interesting, and others who say that the world is not interesting. But obviously there is no “world” around us

that is the same for everybody. The world is what we take in. If we look widely and deeply, we live in a world that is wide and deep. If we look narrowly and only on the surface of things, we live in a world that is narrow and only surface-deep.

It is, then, no mean power we possess, this power to open the eyes of our minds and behold what is there to see. Obviously, we have much more to do than just to look around; but as far as it goes, looking at things is one good way to use our minds.



## CHAPTER III

### WE TAKE THE WORLD IN HAND

**I**N ONE of its ways of working, the mind merely accepts the world. It does nothing but allow impressions to be made upon it. We see a landscape and enjoy it. We remember a night under stars and relive the experience.

When it works in another way, the mind makes the world over. Actively it works upon objects and happenings. We see a landscape and start figuring out how to clear a pathway through the crowded trees. We recall how we delayed too long, last year, about ordering winter coal, and shivered through days of waiting. Remembering this, we decide to do differently this year.

In its passive role, the mind collects experiences. In its active role, it reconstructs experience. Both are necessary. Without the gathering of experience, our actions would be careless and probably mistaken. Without the reconstruction of experience, nothing would be changed from what it is now to what we should rather have it be. There would be stones but no stone walls; forests, but no orchards; sounds, but no music.

A man and his mind go forth together every morning. They do not go forth into an empty world. Neither do they go forth into a world where everything is as it should be. There simply is no such place for them to go. Here is a man who lives in a small town. He steps out of his house on an autumn morning and stands looking at his modest garden in deep content. It seems good to him this morning to have a house and garden; to be able to stand on the front steps and look up and down the street at other houses set in other gardens, and to know that friendly neighbors live in them.

His eyes come back to his own lawn, to the level of it and the slope that runs down to the roadway, and a pucker creases his forehead. That slope! In spite of everything, it is always rough. The grass never looks right. Suddenly his face lightens and he calls to his wife:

“Look here, I’ve got an idea. If we could get hold of some of those bricks where they’re tearing down Smith’s store, I could build a wall there and fill in behind it and stop dragging the lawn-mower up and down that hill.”

The man has an idea—and something is going to be different.

Another man looks at his home. He likes it. But he is not at peace about it. The day is clear, but over his house he sees a dark cloud visible only to him—a

mortgage. He bought the house when times were good. The payments did not seem too large. With any luck at all he could have kept them up. But times changed. Now, it seems, he will go the way of thousands of other victims of mortgages.

He looks up and down the street at other houses, standing in other gardens, and thinks of the neighbors he knows in them. He tries to remember all he knows about what each neighbor paid for his house, and what his condition was when he bought it. In some cases he knows the whole story. In others he has to guess. Suddenly he seems to glimpse dark clouds over most of the houses.

"Why the devil can't we do something about it? If all of us got together and formed a home owners' association, the chances are ten to one we'd get payments scaled down."

The man has an idea. He will talk to Jack Wilson first. Jack knows a lot about real estate law. Then there is Harry Brown, a serious fellow. Brown is just the one to go doggedly about a job like this.

So he stands, thinking over the neighbors he would have to work with until he can practically see them sitting together as a home owners' association. Something is going to be different.

We have two kinds of invention here: what we can call physical invention, and what we can call social.

In the one case, a man sees a load of bricks would add to the beauty of his garden. In the other, a man sees how his neighbors might be organized and, working with a common purpose, add to his security and theirs.

There is no situation which any one of us enters that is not the product of an invention by somebody in the past; and in nearly every case there has been both physical and social invention. Perhaps more to the point is that there is no situation in which we find ourselves that does not give a chance for both kinds of invention. If we ignore this fact and live along day after day without ever turning the not-very-good into the better, we simply lose one of the most important privileges we have as human beings.

Also, we miss a first-rate chance to enjoy our own minds. For a mind is never a better companion than when it is busy with a new idea, happily engaged in trying to turn an old situation we do not quite like into a new one that we can like better. There is some place to go with a mind like that, just as surely as there is some place to go with a good friend who has a plan and a willingness to let us in on it.

So far as our own inventing is concerned, we often cramp our style by having too much respect for great inventors. In school we all studied about the lives of these inventors—the hardships they suffered, the obstacles they overcame, the heroic stubbornness with

which they held their course toward a goal that no one but themselves could see. Most of us modest human beings suspect that we lack something that these great ones had. Perhaps we are just too lazy, or have simply never had an idea that moved us deeply enough to become the one central driving force of all our energy. This does not mean, however, that we can stop using the inventive power of our minds and still remain, in any real sense, alive. We may keep our physical bodies alive and comfortable by making use of other people's inventions. But to some extent, at least, we can feed our own spirits only with our own inventions. And there is this piece of luck: if we open our eyes, we shall not go far before we find some situation that we can make better.

Perhaps the best way to test our powers is in getting on with other people. We may not have much confidence in our ability to solve human problems in their bigger forms, in national and international affairs. But we can begin at home, in the house where we live, or on our own street.

Here is a bashful youngster. She is, we will say, our thirteen-year-old daughter. Awkwardly she is trying to feel her way from childhood into adolescence. She does not know how to act as the grown-up that she wants to be. She does clumsily what she thinks is called for, and every clumsy action drives her back upon herself, increases her bashfulness, which in turn

increases a clumsiness that again increases her discomfort.

What can we do about her? We cannot prevent her having to live through the awkward age. It is simply one of the crosses we all have to bear. But can we not notice what, among the things she tries to do, she does with the greatest success? Can we not, without seeming to notice, arrange things so that she will have more chance to do what she does best? Encouraged by success, she will be able gradually to be more at ease.

Or down the street there is a neighbor who never seems quite able to break into the conversation of the group. We like him. We have noticed many a Sunday morning how relaxed he looks, how at ease with himself and the world, as he and his collie dog start off together. Also, our ten-year-old son thinks he is swell.

But when he is at our house, among a group of neighbors, he seems to be all feet and hands. We have noticed him, time and again, getting ready to make a remark. His remarks do not come easily. They start away back in his mind and get ready to come. We can see him grow a little more tense in his chair. We can feel him watching for an opening, which, as often as not, comes and goes before he can get his voice under way. We have heard him start remarks and falter into silence after half a dozen words because a more confident voice took the air as its own.

What can we do about him? Here is a chance for us to test our own powers of social invention. What does the man know best? His work? Dogs? Apple trees? He has great pride in a row of apple trees back of his house. What questions about what he knows could we ask that would give him a chance to give a short answer? How can we get him started? Perhaps we can bring him in on groups that are not just sitting in chairs talking, but have something to do with their hands. We have noticed that he is not clumsy when his hands are doing something they know how to do. They are not clumsy with pruning shears. They are not clumsy with the roots of a young tree when he plants it. There, perhaps, is a skill that we ourselves could invite him to use in our behalf and the community's behalf. There, perhaps, is our chance to invent for him a way of getting the satisfaction that comes from belonging to a group of friends.

It would seem to be clear that no one of us lives in a physical or social setting that is either hopelessly bad so that nothing can be done about it, or perfect so that nothing needs to be done. It would seem, also, that any one of us can, if we try, find the point at which a change is needed and is possible. When we find such a point, we have a center for our thinking; we can begin figuring out; we have a chance to try things—to fail, perhaps, or partially succeed—and keep on trying until we have what we want. We have dis-

covered, in short, something that needs to be invented.

When we make such a discovery and do something which improves our own or someone else's condition, we ourselves are made happy. We have a sense of having achieved something, of having turned our mind to effective use. But also, the other person has been made happy. Through our invention he has been rescued from his awkwardness.

This is why we human beings rate the inventive power so high. We admire and praise those who can take the materials of existence in hand—physical or social—and mold them to better shapes and purposes. But it would be a sad mistake to let all the inventing be done by others. Here is a type of experience that every one of us can enjoy if he will merely keep his mind alert for situations that need bettering.

It may be nothing more than an electric light that glares too unmercifully in people's eyes and that needs some way of being hid from sight; or it may be a home where the children are having too little chance to be alone. In any case, the person of alert mind can ask the question: "Can't I do something about it?"

Once he asks the question, he is not likely to stop short of finding some answer. When he finds the answer he is a happy man. He has changed his world and made it more pleasant for himself and others.

## CHAPTER IV

### IF AT FIRST YOU *DO* SUCCEED, TRY AGAIN

WHY DO we keep on working so hard at this job of inventing better ways to live? The reason would seem to be that we want a better world in which to do our living. It might seem that we make our inventive efforts in the hope of reaching a time when we can stop making them. But that is precisely what is not true. We may think we want to stop exerting ourselves, but we find a high suicide rate among those who come to the point where they actually try it.

There is something here about human nature that needs examining—something rather surprising. It is as if we were always fooling ourselves into thinking that what is important is the reaching of a goal, while all the time what we enjoy is the experience of going toward it. Perhaps we set the goals only in order to have the experience of heading toward them.

Every once in a while we hear one man say of another:

“Poor old Brown! He’s gone stale.”

What does the speaker mean? If we examine his idea, it usually comes to this. Brown is doing, day

after day, the same thing in the same manner. He has stopped wanting to change the world in which he moves. He has stopped saying to himself—or to his wife, or to his neighbors:

“Look here, I’ve got an idea. Why can’t we . . .”

He has allowed to die in himself his own share of that human inventive energy which has made this planet, the earth, into a human world.

Brown may be a man squeezed by circumstances into a rut. He never had a chance, perhaps, at the training he needed in order to hold the kind of position he once longed for. He started earning his living and, having started, he never reached a time when he was earning enough to buy a little liberty outside of working hours. He is one of those workers bound to routine that our society produces in sad multitudes. He is what Robert Frost has called “a decent product of life’s ironing out.”

Perhaps Brown is one of these ironed-out routiniers, or perhaps he is not. He may, instead, be a man who had a chance at the very training he wanted, who stepped out of college into what all his elders declared to be a position with a future. Perhaps he realized that future in exactly the way he hoped he would. Now, in late middle age, he holds a respected place in his company and in his community. His house is the house on the hill at the best end of the best street in the town. His car is the one that re-

quires the greatest parking space of any in the street. He has a rose garden that a gardener takes care of. He plays golf. He belongs to a club. He has the leisure he always wanted. He would serve, in short, as a copybook example of success.

When he is invited to return on commencement day to his old school to speak to a new generation of youngsters, it is precisely of his success that he is expected to talk.

Not too boastfully, of course. He is a cultivated man, after a fashion. He will not say in so many words:

“Look at me.”

He will talk, instead, of the kind of opportunities young people in America enjoy. But he will mean that those young people enjoy an opportunity to become what he has become, to retire to the leisure he commands; and for the day he will be very glad to make what he says sound like a program good enough for any young life.

At other times, he may have doubts about it; or he may simply take it for granted that it is the destiny of a man, when he succeeds, to live the life of a “success”—that is, to live a life where most of his real work, most of his good ideas, are in the past, and where he is, as we say, enjoying the fruits of his labors.

The trouble with just enjoying the fruits of our

labors is that it is too much like trying to enjoy a long series of excellent meals with no exercise between. What should come as a delightful punctuation mark in life is simply in front of us all the time. So long as life is vigorous, the pattern of it has to be that of repeated strivings and reachings, each reaching to be a moment of satisfaction before a new striving. It is almost as if we could draw the picture of a vigorous human life by using the dashes and dots of the Morse code: .- . . . - .

Two types of people seem to be condemned to a life made stale by the same things over and over. They are the prisoner and the chronic invalid. We wonder how they keep up even the appearance of courage with which to face days that go on endlessly the same. But the astonishing thing is that so many of us who are neither prisoners nor invalids let ourselves reach a stage where our lives are very much like theirs.

We live in homes that are not as convenient as we, with our own two hands, could make them. But we never quite get around to doing what we intend to do, and after a while we stop intending. We stop looking at what is shabby or broken or crooked with the alert eye of a human being who is figuring out what to do and how to do it.

We live in a community, perhaps, where streets are dangerous for our children to cross, and where there

is not enough open space in which those children can play. We stop looking at streets and vacant lots with the eye of the social inventor. We stop saying:

“See here, things have gone on this way long enough.”

When we reach that point there is a double failure: streets continue to be dangerous for our children, and we miss the experience of making them better—an experience that would leave us at the end of it not only with a sense of satisfaction, but with more social skill, a more seeing eye, and a greater readiness to try out our powers of social invention.

Staleness in human life is not so much a product of circumstances as a product of habits. When a person is inclined to say of himself, “I’m going stale,” the thing he can do to save himself is clear. He can stand in the room he lives in or the shop he works in, or he can walk along the street where his house stands, and he can do this concrete thing: He can look for a point at which his own or somebody else’s activity is hampered by an inconvenience that he, or he and they together, can remedy. It may mean putting up a shelf in his wife’s kitchen, or it may mean organizing a consumers’ league or a book club, but he will save himself from staleness just to the extent that he recognizes in practice that, so far as we humans are concerned, no environment is ever quite good enough to leave alone.

Edgar Lee Masters once wrote:

Friends, it is folly to prison God,  
In any house that is built with hands.

What he meant, I think, is that our idea of the Infinite becomes too small when we squeeze it to a size that will fit neatly inside any real building. But he might have said with equal truth: Friends, it is folly to prison ourselves in any environment we have thus far succeeded in building. It is a mistake for us to trim down our hopes and expectations until we accept as satisfactory something that is not yet good enough. Explaining his point of view, Masters goes on:

For the game of the soul is never to find,  
The game of the soul is to follow.

This seems too extreme a statement. If we are “never to find,” the game doesn’t seem worth the candle. It might be nearer our human experience to say: The game of the soul is to find, again and again; and from each new vantage point, to take a broader, more triumphant look at the human scene; and then each time, to set out sturdily and resourcefully toward a new goal that will eventually be a new point of departure.

We keep ourselves vigorously alive to the extent that we live actively. Living actively means living

with eyes alert for the bettering of life conditions, with minds skilled to find where the still-better can be substituted for the what-is. Where inventive alertness comes in by the front door, staleness goes out by the window.



## CHAPTER V

### WE WATCH HOW THINGS WORK

CHILDREN are dear to us—and infuriate us—because they ask endless questions. They don't ask questions because they want to do something with the answers. That is the way an adult asks a question.

"How do I get to the Staten Island ferry?" asks a man.

Give him an answer, and, if he trusts you, he will follow the directions. He wants to know, because he wants to do something with the knowledge. Most of the questions of children have no such practical purpose. Children want to know—just because they want to know.

A child will take his toy automobile apart and be busy for a long time finding out how the wheels are put on and taken off, how the thing goes. He is not planning to become an auto mechanic. He is merely having a good time, finding out how the thing works.

When we watch children behave like this, with their questions and their taking apart of things that adults would rather have left as they are, we get a glimpse of one of the most interesting and valuable

phases of the human mind. As human beings, we have to keep alive, and we must attend to the practical things that help us do so. But as human beings we do not merely have to keep alive. We have the chance to be and do a lot of things that have no relation whatever to our survival.

A man is walking through the woods. "Look there," he says to his friend, pointing to a mound that seems to be made of sawdust. "What in the world is that?"

"Looks like an ant hill," says his friend.

They stoop down and examine it, poke it with their sticks, lift off some of the top until they surprise an army of ants.

"I've got a book on ants," says the second man. "It'll tell us about these fellows."

He scoops up a few of the ants, drops them into a tobacco can he empties of its few remaining scraps.

"That'll keep them till we get home."

Neither of them intends to be an expert on ants. Neither is interested in exterminating ants. And yet it never occurs to them that they are wasting time, trying to find out about the habits of this particular kind of insect. They are just two men with minds that enjoy digging into things. In this case it happens to be ants that have caught their interest. It might be anything else. Their minds enjoy finding out what things are and how they work.

I recall a morning in a coppersmith's shop in northern New York. My wife and I had driven in on the chance that we might discover something attractive for the house. After looking about for a while, we found exactly what we wanted and bought it. As the coppersmith wrapped it up, one of us asked him about the different colors of the copper on display. How did he get those different colors?

That started him talking. He told us about chemicals and fusing. Then we wanted to know how the copper was shaped. What kind of tool made this particular shape and that? He took us into his little shop, and before we knew it we were deep in the lore of copper craftsmanship.

I recall a similar time in one of the roadway pottery shops. As we moved around trying to make our selection, we had a glimpse of a potter at work in the rear of the building. That was too much for us to resist. Who has not wanted to know how the shapes of bowls and cups and vases come to be the way they are? We went to the rear of the shop and watched the potter while, with deft fingers, he formed a pitcher out of clay. Then we talked with him. How was the firing done? Could we see it? How were glazes mixed? How did he get the exquisitely shaded effects?

We call all this curiosity. Solemn people add the word "idle," and shake their heads in disapproval.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” solemn people say.  
“Move on. Go about your business.”

They might have said to us that we were taking up valuable time of the coppersmith and the potter. But there is no beatitude which says that the solemn shall inherit the earth. As a matter of fact, it is probably this hankering to know about things—how they are made, how they work—that has enabled us human beings to inherit as much of the earth as we have. Ants move along about their business, but after millions of years they are still moving along in the same old ways and doing business at the same old stand.

A young farm woman said to her neighbor:

“This year I’m going to dabble in caterpillars.”

Her neighbor looked at her in astonishment. But the young farm woman knew what she was about. For two years she had been learning about birds, not how to shoot them or snare them or cook them, but how to know them—their names, their songs, their ways of building nests, their migration habits. She had learned much about birds, and she had had a happy time of it. Now she was out on further adventure. This year she would dabble in caterpillars.

Her word “dabble” was a good one. It was her half-humorous way of saying that she was not going in for serious study of caterpillars. She was not aiming at a college degree. She was going to keep her amateur standing.

It is amazing to think of the amount of time the human race spends in the pursuit of interests that are of no practical use. People read books on astronomy, geology, biology, chemistry, history, archeology, architecture, economics, politics, with no thought of doing anything with the information they gain. And yet it would be a pretty narrow-minded moralist who would tell them to do otherwise. Why do they do it, and what is the good of their doing it?

The answer to the first question, I suppose, is that we are naturally interested in causes and effects. When we see a thing happen, we have the habit of asking why it happened. So we read history, and enjoy finding out why one king succeeded another, why one civilization produced its great works of art, its philosophers and poets; why another produced nothing worthy of the name. We read geology and enjoy finding out how the earth and its rocks came to be what they now are. We read biology, and have the same kind of intense pleasure in discovering how and why one kind of living creature develops into another.

Cause and effect—we live in the midst of them all the time. They form the drama of our life. We read economics to find the causes of our depressions; politics to discover why we are always in conflict. All the while we know that we ourselves shall not be able to solve problems that are world-wide in extent. Why, then, do we read about them? Because we like to find

out about them. That, for most of us, seems a good enough reason.

To be sure, there are times and occasions when some of our information helps. We may, from our reading of economics, learn what governmental policy to trust, what to distrust. From our reading of history, we may learn what not to do in the same foolish way in which it was done before. But these practical uses of our reading, while genuine, are small compared with the amount of reading we do. We are creatures who like to find out how the wheels go around.

“But what is the good of it?” asks doubting Thomas.

This question is asked by people who want all education to be strictly practical, by parents who do not want their children to fritter away their time reading useless books, or engaging in useless activities, such as exploring the woods for birds, or spending their nights peering through a telescope.

These practical people miss an important point. When they insist upon being practical, they are saying that in this life of ours we should chiefly, if not exclusively, think about our own affairs. Practical activities are those in which we try to do something and individually succeed by doing it. It is practical to know how to be a banker, or a teacher, or a

plumber. In such practical activities we ourselves hold the center of the stage.

When, on the other hand, we are interested in a thing for its own sake, not ours—interested in what it is, in how it lives or how it works—we ourselves move away from the center of the stage. We let the thing we are interested in take the spotlight.

I doubt whether there is anything in life more important than this. As a human being I simply have to be interested in myself. I should die otherwise. But if I am interested in myself only, I had better die anyway. For if I am as self-centered as all that, I shall be a poor member of society.

On the other hand, people will get along happily with me, and I shall get along happily with myself, only to the extent that I have learned the art of moving out of myself, of giving importance to things that play no part in my own affairs. If I can learn this art, I will not judge everything by how it affects me personally. I will give other things a run for their money. I will grant them their place in the world.

This, I think, is why our urge to dig into things, to find out their hows and whys, is one of the saving qualities of our human nature.

There is wisdom in the saying: “Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

Notice that it does not run: “Except ye *be* as little

children." An adult must not remain a child; he has to grow up. But as a mature person, he must *become* as a little child; that is, in the years when life forces him to be almost always practical, to keep his eyes fixed on his own business of remaining alive, he must recover the impersonal curiosity of the child. He must be willing to be interested in things outside his own concerns.

Most of what is greatly valuable in life has come out of this childlike curiosity. On the highest level it is the impulse that makes scientists of some men. It is a way of being impractical that turns out to be, in the long run, the way to be genuinely practical.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE MIND AS A WEAPON

**T**HREE is always fighting to be done in the world. Even in the best society we are able to imagine —a society where swords have been beaten into plowshares—there would still be fighting to be done.

In the first place, we are faced by the forces of nature. These are still so little known and so uncertain that they can behave like deadly enemies. When they attack us, we have to know how to defend ourselves. We all remember how, not long ago, the waters of the Ohio River valley gathered in swollen volume and came surging down upon farms and villages and cities, carrying away the things that man had made for his security and comfort, destroying animals and humans, and leaving in their wake a vast wreckage.

In those days of terror, I remember gangs of men carrying sandbags to the Cincinnati levee; men out in boats, rescuing families marooned in their houses; ambulances hurrying the sick and hurt to the hospitals. And I recall, too, hearing over the radio the voice of the city manager instructing the people what they were to do, where they were not to go, how they could help.

It was war. Man's mind against the forces of nature. At that time, as the waters swept through one city after another, man's intelligence seemed puny before the terrific power of the flood. Man's mind was fighting, but it was not equipped to come out victor. But even as the terrors continued, one could hear the people say:

"This thing must not happen again. We need a better flood control. We've got to have it."

These were human beings at man's old business of looking over his weapons, finding them not good enough, thinking of how they might be made more effective in defense and attack.

A child is hovering between life and death. The parents have called for the only weapon they know—medical science personified in the doctor. He comes prepared to fight. He takes the temperature, feels the pulse, looks into the throat, taps the chest—trying to locate the enemy. Then, keeping his face unrevealing, he takes things out of his satchel, calls for a glass of water, passes his hand over the child's forehead, meanwhile thinking hard how he is to carry on the campaign. He knows he must strike swiftly and at the right point. Again, it is man's mind girding itself for battle, a battle for the life of a child.

We all have at times to do something of this sort. We are not always menaced by floods or deadly disease. But in one way or another we have to guard

ourselves against forces in our environment that diminish our security or comfort. Recently a neighbor of ours went down into his basement to examine the woodwork at every point where it came into contact with the earth. He was looking for termites. He found no signs of any, but he decided it was better to be wise in time than to be sorry afterwards. So he had copper sills installed. These were the weapons that man had invented as effective means for turning back the insect enemy.

We fight against winter's cold with furnaces and defend ourselves from summer's heat with insulated walls.

When we count up all the things we do to guard ourselves, it looks as if life were little but a defense against enemies seeking to destroy. We fight against the deadly thrust of lightning by making our structures lightning-proof. We put up screens to keep out mosquitoes. We have refrigerators to prevent food from spoiling. We scatter disinfectants where there are odors of decay.

There are people who say that men have grown soft, that we have lost the rugged vitality of our primitive ancestors who had to fight or perish. But we are fighting all the time, only the fighting is now done with our minds. Every time I decide that the tires of my car are worn dangerously smooth and I put on new ones, I am making my particular kind of fight

—a defensive fight against disaster. Every time I stop at a red light, I can recognize in that light the weapon that we have learned to use against the recklessnesses and the confusions that endanger life.

It is nonsense to believe that, as we move farther away from the cave man, we let our minds grow less alert, less vigorous in defense and attack. The more civilized we become, the more we find that there are things we care about that need to be defended, and things we fear that need to be attacked.

Sad to say, we also have to fight human beings. There are people who do things that diminish the lives, liberties, and happiness of other people. They may do it by breaking in upon our possessions and taking away what they themselves have no right to possess. Or they may do it by injuring or destroying our lives. We have to invent ways of protecting ourselves against such human foes. Police systems, courts of law, jails, and prisons are the weapons which we have shaped to defeat such enemies and discourage their practices.

But there are subtler enemies of our lives with whom it is more difficult to deal because they pretend to keep inside the law. There are those who trap the unwary investor into buying gold bricks, or who gang up in the stock market and manipulate securities so that they sell for more than they are worth.

We have to forge weapons of the law to protect ourselves against these crooks. There are those—perhaps the most dastardly of all—who put poison into medicines and cosmetics, or who sell food that is unsafe for human consumption. In the Spanish-American War we had the scandal of rotten meat sold to the army. The people who sold the rotten meat knew what they were selling. They were willing to injure human beings because it brought them more money.

There are people—individuals and firms—that make and sell what is unsafe for use. I recall a serious automobile accident that occurred on a mountain road because a part that should have been renewed was flimsily patched together. The man who was injured had bought the car in good faith from a used-car concern. He had no suspicion of the defective part. On a steep mountain road the part broke, the car rolled down a canyon-side, and the driver was terribly injured.

I recall also, in my boyhood days, witnessing the death of a boy who had gone to the roof of a public building, leaned against the parapet, and had fallen to the street when the parapet gave way. An investigation showed the contractor had skimped on the cement in the mortar to such an extent that the bricks scarcely held together. He made money—and killed a boy.

It is a curious comment upon our civilization that

such things are done as part of business practice. We know that they are done. Here, again, we are in a fight, a fight against dishonest practices. When we form a consumers' cooperative, we make for ourselves a weapon of defense against unsafe products and loaded prices. When we organize a consumers' research organization to analyze the products that are sold to us, we make a weapon of defense. When we pass pure food and drug laws, and laws for the inspection of buildings, steamships, motor cars, highways, we make weapons of attack and defense.

In these things we dare not be soft and sentimental. We have to care enough about decent ways of living to make the indecent ways increasingly impossible.

But there is a much more difficult form of fighting that we have to carry on. It is the fight between different opinions that are equally sincere.

We do not all see eye to eye. As a human race, we are still pathetically limited in our outlooks and confused as to our purposes. So we do not all agree. We misunderstand one another. The things we want to happen are not what others want; others want things that seem to us wrong and sometimes terrible.

Even war—terrible as it is—cannot be regarded as merely a fight of good people against those who are evil. The case is not so simple as that. To the one

side, its cause is holy; to the opposite side, it is damnable. So each side takes up arms in the sincere belief that it is fighting for justice and truth against injustice and lies. The American Civil War was a perfect example of two groups of people fighting, each group believing profoundly in the righteousness of its own cause and the unrighteousness of its enemy's cause.

In political warfare, we frequently make the mistake—particularly if we belong to one of the two larger parties—of believing that the opposing party is merely evil. But political warfare, for the most part, is a fight between sincerities. The people who oppose us think the way they do because they have come to be the way they are. We think the way we do because we are the way we are.

Where there is a fight of sincerities, we have to learn civilized ways of fighting. This is why we are coming to believe that mere brute force is a bad argument. To blow up neighboring people because they cannot see as we do settles nothing. To throw people whose political views differ from ours into concentration camps, or to club them into obedience, settles nothing.

The major problem of a civilized society is to devise civilized ways of carrying on the fights of sincerities. One way we have invented is that of free and open discussion.

If we start with the idea that anyone who opposes

us is bad, utterly bad—whether he belongs to another party or to another race or nation—we shall act like people who suppose themselves to be righteous, and who take up weapons against the unrighteous. Most of our religious persecutions have been carried on in this spirit. Today, the persecutions of racial minorities proceed in the same spirit. One side is completely convinced that it is right, that it has truth. It sets itself up, therefore, as judge and executioner.

Calvin did this, back in the sixteenth century, when he condemned the noble-spirited Servetus to the stake because Servetus held religious views that differed from his own. Hitler and his hoodlum gang do this when they let loose their barbaric wrath upon the Jews and Catholics and upon all those whose political views differ from their own.

The uncivilized thing in all these cases is the idea that one man or one group has the complete and unquestionable truth, and the right to impose this truth upon others. Nothing more barbaric has occurred for centuries than the assumptions, publicly expressed, that Hitler, the Fuehrer of the Germans, can make no mistake. When we become civilized people, we realize, with a good deal of humility, that we can all make mistakes and that the opinions of others which seem wrong to us may not be wrong at all. It may simply be that we ourselves are ignorant, or misinformed, or not logical in our thinking.

When we are really civilized, we see that our fights of sincerities have to be carried on with the freest and most generous give-and-take of opinion. We have to be willing to listen to what the other person has to say, and we expect him to be willing to listen to us.

Because we have to fight many different battles, we have to have the qualities needed in each. To fight against the violence of nature, we have to have not only courage but intelligence. We have to learn about the forces that can destroy us and about the counter forces that can save us. This means a willingness to look at our world and find out about it. Scientists, physicians, engineers are all working at this task. The individual who is neither scientist, physician, nor engineer needs to draw upon their knowledge and skill, and he is also under obligation to encourage the growth of such knowledge and skill in the world.

To fight against the human foes in our midst who deliberately set out to injure life, we have to possess certain citizen-qualities. It is not enough to know that there are thieves and murderers. We have to ask why there are thieves and murderers, and what can be done in our social arrangements to diminish their number.

It is not enough to know that we punish these anti-social individuals. We have to ask whether our forms of punishment are just, whether they make criminals into worse criminals, or make them into persons

capable of reentering human society. Also, it is not enough to know that there are confidence men, and stock market sharps, and falsifying advertisers, and sellers of poisonous foods and drugs. We have to possess the kind of citizen-interest that promotes laws to discourage these criminals.

To fight for the views we care about and against views we disapprove or dislike, we have to possess the rarest of all qualities—a generous willingness to listen to views other than our own. If we are employers, we have to be willing to listen to what labor demands. If we are workers, we have to be willing to consider the problems of employers. If we are members of a political party, we have to be willing not only to listen to our opponents, but to welcome the presentation of their views. If we are members of a nation in conflict with another nation, we have to spend every possible energy to keep open the channels of communication so that we may give mutual understanding the best possible chance to develop.

We have above all to learn to beware of being quickly and passionately “against.” This is our easiest vice and the most dangerous. We are civilized to the extent that we are willing to see some justice on the other side and try to get that justice realized.

So, as fighting creatures, we have obligations thrust upon us. We have to develop the kind of mind that can fight not only effectively but wisely.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MIND AS ARTIST

WE NEEDED a new chair for our living room, so we went chair-hunting among the canyons of the city. The weapon we carried was invisible to the naked eye. It was simply an image in our minds, a picture of what a certain corner of our living room looked like, and what we wanted it to look like with the chair in it. When we stood finally on the ninth floor of the department store, with chairs stretching wide around us in all directions, this image was the only thing we had to rely on to keep us from spearing the wrong animal.

It did not surprise us that we were able to refuse one chair after another without hesitation.

“No, that won’t do; ours has to be maple!”

“No, ours has to be high-backed—something of the Colonial type.”

“No, nothing of the overstuffed variety.”

It seemed the most natural thing in the world that we could carry our home with us when we went shopping, much as the turtle carries his home on his back—except that ours was inside instead of out. We humans are doing this sort of thing all the time. We

choose things that "fit" what we have in our minds. We are shaping up new whole patterns out of pieces that we pick out, one here and one there, because something in us tells us that these pieces go together.

In our most familiar story of human creation, we are told that God created man in his own image. Each of us, in turn, creates one thing after another according to images that reflect his own sense of values. In this respect, we create—in our own image—rooms and gardens, institutions or candlesticks.

We live in a world that may have been made in six days or in many millions of years; but, whatever the time it took to create it, the world has never yet been made to our complete satisfaction. We have to try our hand at it. From the human point of view, it is a world not of finished products, but of raw materials: raw materials that can keep the shapes we give them; that can take on colors we find pleasing; that can be finished with surfaces that delight us.

We are never more truly at our best than when we are seeing possibilities in materials and somehow stirring our hands and minds to bring these possibilities into realization. "Male and female created he them"—and male and female they became creators.

What makes things belong together in the creative sense? To try to answer that question is to find ourselves plunged into the whole bewildering subject of art. But if we go at even this bewildering subject from

the angle of our common daily experience we may find that it makes good sense.

I think of a story my wife tells me about an especially delightful friendship she once enjoyed with a young woman who was an artist. The two of them would go on long walks together, with my wife in the role of artistic disciple.

Every so often her friend would stop and, framing a section of landscape with her hands, say:

“Now if you were going to make a picture of that, what would you put in, and what would you leave out? Don’t you see how it is? If you put in those popular trees and played up their height and straightness you would have one kind of picture, and you might not want to put in that live oak at all. Or you might want to put it in too, by way of contrast. But you’d want to know why you put it in—what direction you wanted the onlooker’s eye to take, what feeling of a thrust upward or of solidity you intended him to get.”

Or the scene they looked at may have been a city street, perhaps a shabby street on which stood one up-to-date building at odds with its neighbors. And the artist would say to my wife:

“Now, if you were painting that, you’d have to know what particular comment you wanted to make upon the street, out of all the ones that might be made. Is it the almost uniform drabness that you feel most

strongly? Then your sense of fitness requires that you leave out that new building, that incongruous note.

"It really is there, of course—in fact. But, artistically, it isn't there. Or maybe what strikes you is the very fact that in a city things stand side by side that seem as if they did not belong in the same block. If that is what you are feeling, you might even want to emphasize the new building. You might want to show that it and its shabby neighbors stand there on the street together, and yet remote from each other, the way the rich and the poor may stand on the city pavement looking into a shop window, side by side, yet miles apart."

The effect of this friendship, my wife tells me, is that she has a way of entertaining herself that doesn't wear out. Riding on a train and looking out of a window, she can create from the elements before her eyes, by leaving in certain things and imagining that the others are not there, one picture after another in which the mood is clear and the pieces hang together. Waiting for a bus on a street corner, she can study the look of an apartment house across the way and change it into half a dozen different pictures by emphasizing or dropping out elements in its actual make-up. Looking at the faces in the subway, she can fill her mind with portraits of human beings—very often with half a dozen different studies of the same face, so that in one it is a study in tiredness, in an-

other a study in human inertia, in another a study in loneliness.

The law courts pretend that it is possible to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The artist—and the artist in every one of us—knows that to tell any artistic truth clearly you have to be satisfied to tell a part of the truth and leave out confusing details. You have to select the things that hang together and leave out the things that do not belong.

I have read no end of discussions on why it is important for us to create things for ourselves. I do not know that any one of these has ever quite given the answer. I am sure I have never quite caught it myself. Yet I know from experience that life is more deeply exciting when I am trying to put pieces of it together in ways that fit than when I am simply satisfied to go my way among things as they are.

Also, I know this from experience: People who are creatively alert are much more interesting than those who are not. They seem almost to belong to a different species or perhaps to a higher level of evolution. They see not only what is but what might be; and the power to see what might be is one of the chief traits that distinguish human beings from one another.

One of the friends I admire is a farmer in California. When he was a young man he was a blacksmith. When he moved to a farm many years ago, he

decided that no home could be complete that did not have a blacksmith shop.

Practically, it was an advantage to be able to shoe his own horses, to mend harness, to do a dozen different things called for in the running of his farm. But that is only a fraction of the story of his blacksmith shop. It is the story of the love this man's fingers have for metal, the story of what his eyes can see when he looks at a raw piece of iron. So if you want to look for him on a rainy day, or at the slack season when there is no farm work to be done, you might as well begin by looking in the blacksmith shop. The chances are you will find him there, and the chances are that he will not be shoeing a horse, but making a knocker for the door of his daughter-in-law's home, or a candlestick to send to his daughter for a Christmas present.

People who are like this farmer live in a world that contains more possibilities than do the worlds of non-creative people. It is a world where interesting things can be made to happen, a world where new forms can be persuaded to emerge. It is therefore a world that the human being can experience with a peculiar intimacy. He is not on the outside of it. He is as surely a force to be reckoned with in predicting his world's future as are the natural forces of sun and wind. He is a changer of things. Put him in the presence of

something, and his eyes see what is not there. His hands itch to be about their proper business of making the might-be into the is.

A group of us lingered recently around a dinner table. We lingered until the candles had burned down into soft lumps of ivory wax. We were not talking of candles. We were talking of a world that seemed, that night, to be balanced terribly on the brink of war. We were all deep in doubt, deep in perplexity. So many things had happened that we had previously declared impossible that there really seemed no point in saying anything at all. And yet, somehow, hesitatingly, in broken phrases, we were trying to put together some conviction to carry us through what tomorrow might bring.

I could not help noticing how unintentionally, yet how inevitably, as we sat there, gloomily pondering and listening to one radio report after another, expecting at any moment that the news might be war, our fingers reached out and took soft candle wax and began turning it into shapes. Why, with a civilization on the brink of ruin, did the sensitive hands of a boy shape up a little human figure? Was this another instance of a creator lost in chaos and making his way out of it by picking up raw substance and breathing into it the breath of meaning? It was almost like watching God make the first man. Why did the hands

of a woman make a little wax bowl with handles? There was no sense, literally, in this proceeding. But something in us—something that will survive all wars—was finding its release in turning the shapeless into shape.

The reports that came in over the radio that night pictured a world insane. But there was eternal sanity in the fingers shaping wax.

The more of this sort of thing there is in life, the more profound and varied the ways in which we shape what is beautiful out of the images in our minds, the more chance there is that we shall in time be capable of shaping a civilization we can live in and live for.

But to be an artist is not merely to be a maker of things. We can also be artists in the making of ourselves.

Life can be full of details that mean nothing. It can be torn apart by conflicting aims and impulses. Indeed, the unity of life can be so broken that we speak of someone as a split personality, a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Or a life can become so overspecialized that it never achieves wholeness. It can concentrate entirely upon one skill or one knowledge and leave the rest of itself completely undeveloped. Frequently the very people we call artists are such partial selves. They are artists only in one small area—of paints, or marble,

or musical sound. They are not artists in the total area of their lives. And so, very frequently, they not only make a mess of their own lives but mess up the lives of others.

To be artists in the shaping of ourselves, the same rule applies as above: We must find the interests, aims, and activities that go together in such a way as to form a unity of life.

We have, first of all, to come to some decision as to the kind of person we mean to be. Obviously, if he is wise, we shall want to keep mentally growing throughout life. In the second place, we shall doubtless want to be one who is emotionally in control of himself. And in the third place, we shall want to be one who is not centered wholly in himself.

Here are three qualities of personality: continuous growth, emotional control, and interest in others. When combined, these can make the kind of person whose life has unity of aim and direction.

If these are the qualities we care about, we are artists in living if we do the things that develop them and refuse to do the things that are in conflict with them. Thus, in order to keep growing, we shall have to keep our minds open and interested. We shall have to listen, and read, and study, and be unafraid of new ideas.

If someone who is ambitious to keep growing mentally allows some of his opinions to harden into preju-

dice, if he is unwilling to face new facts, he ceases to be a unified self. He becomes to that extent a split personality—a Dr. Jekyll when he aspires to keep growing, a Mr. Hyde when his opinions become prejudiced, set and unchangeable.

Again, in order to gain emotional control, we have to be willing to govern our emotions by reason. If we fly off the handle, go into adult tantrums, get mad on various occasions, we are doing what goes counter to our intentions about emotional control. Again, we have split our life.

Finally, in order to extend our interests beyond ourselves, we have to learn to have the kinds that are genuinely centered in others. Whenever we seek to make friends merely because they may help us, or to influence people merely because we want to get something out of them, we break the unity of our intention. Our self-centered motives, then, conflict with our wish to be other than self-centered.

Existence is not merely given to us. It is given to us to shape. We have to be creators—of things, and of our own selves. If we are artists, we do the shaping with an eye to the creation of unity. We seek for the things that go together and remove the things that do not belong. In so doing, we exercise the highest privilege that man possesses, to bring the materials of life together into a unity that we can call good.

## CHAPTER V,II

### THE MIND AS GIVER OF HELP

WE LOVE to criticize the world we live in. We don't like its many uglinesses. We are doubtless correct in thinking that the human animal has totaled up more errors than successes in building a world where people can successfully live together. Bad as our human world is, however, we can say one thing about it: There is in it an amazing amount of equipment for giving help.

I do not mean merely that we give occasional dimes to beggars or send annual donations to hospitals or charity associations. I mean the amazing network of activities we have designed to help one another out.

Perhaps as typical as anything in our human arrangements is the sign "Information." We may find it in a railroad station, or hotel lobby, or bank, or museum, or department store. We do not actually see it printed over the entrance to a library, or school, or college, or newspaper office, or church. But it might just as well be there.

"Information" is a sign that indicates the condition that most of us are in most of the time. We are forever coming and going—from one place and to

another, from one interest and to another—and half the time we need to be told how to find our way.

“Can you tell me where . . .” “Can you tell me at what time . . .” “Can you tell me how I should plant my iris bulbs?” “Can you tell me what to do when my child has tantrums?” “Can you tell me how to learn to be a mechanical engineer?” “Can you tell me what to do for a blotched skin? for pimples? for poison ivy?” “Can you tell me how to invest my money?” “Can you tell me how to save my immortal soul?”

We ask all sorts of questions because we have all sorts of things we need to know. With plants and insects the whole thing seems to be settled at the start, even before growing life begins. There are no questions, because the answer is already contained in the seed or in the larva. We humans are not built that way. We are forever scurrying about, trying to find out what to do in situations that are not exactly like what we have known before.

So it is not surprising that we have built ourselves help-giving agencies—hundreds and thousands and millions of them. In the room in which I now sit, there are scores of them. At my right is a bookcase. A short while ago I took down from one of the shelves my Roget’s “Thesaurus.”

“Help!” I cried. “I’ve got a word on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t get it. I need the word. Help me out.”

I never met Roget. As a matter of fact, he is long since dead. But a good many years ago, when he was alive, he had people like me in mind. He set to work to gather words into groups, putting in each group words that meant much the same thing. Now, long after he is gone, his help-center is doing a brisk business. People who need a word turn to his index, find the group of words nearest the one they are seeking, and as often as not, discover what they are looking for. Roget was neither scientist, artist, philosopher, banker, broker, or statesman. He was—and still is—this very special thing, an answerer of a special kind of question.

On the bottom shelf, where the tall books are kept, are a number of volumes that I prize because I know I shall never exhaust their helpfulness. They are the “Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences.” I prize them for two reasons: first, because the information they give me is instant and clear; second, because it is the kind of information that a person now living needs if he wants to understand his modern world of social patterns that are puzzling.

As I look at those volumes I can see thousands of scholars at work, all over the world, gathering first-hand information, digging into authorities, preparing manuscripts, printers setting the type, bookbinders putting the books into shape, so that I in my room

can at any moment stretch out my hand and learn what I could never possibly learn by myself.

Not far away is the ever necessary dictionary—one of man's supreme inventions—ready at hand to reveal to me any of the hundreds of thousands of meanings that the English-speaking race has shaped into language.

On one of the middle shelves is Beard's "Rise of American Civilization." I brought that home once because I wanted to know more about American history than I had learned in textbooks, and to know it more accurately. I called upon Beard for information—and he was there, bound up in a book, ready to answer the call.

So with dozens and scores of other books. As I look them over, I can recall the occasions on which this question or that was uppermost in my mind, and when this book or that seemed the one that might give me the answer to my question. Sometimes it did. Sometimes it did not. Also, there are many books that simply drifted in—some to take permanent possession of my thought and affection, some to drift out again. Many of these were givers of help—of help that I had not asked for but gladly accepted when it came.

As I sit near these books, I can imagine lines running out from them in all directions. They are like fingers pointing.

"You want to know about pictures, do you? Go there and look at that one. Now go there and look at this other. Now we'll talk about them." "You want to know about the human mind? Look over there at that man. I'll tell you about him. Now look at that man, and now at that one." "You want to know about the philosophers? Come along. I'll take you to Plato, and Aristotle, and Plotinus." "You want to know about modern drama? All right, here's Chekhov. And here's Andreev. And here's Ernst Toller."

So they point with their fingers and tell me what they have to say. Am I grateful? What should I have known if I had never been able to get at these answerers of questions? Without them I probably should never have asked many questions nor cared to know about many things, for the curious effect of these helpers we call books is that they not only give us help, but cultivate a taste for wanting more of the same thing. So, because they awaken our minds, we go asking more questions and get hold of more books to answer them.

When we realize that literally millions of individuals all over the world have spent more or less of a lifetime gathering facts and understanding, and putting them into such shape that they can be of help to others, we discover something about human nature that does not look so bad. We may not be able, yet, to stop fighting one another, but we spend a powerful

amount of our energy in helping one another. We not only do it but like to do it. Consult any man who has just helped a blind man across the street or given road directions to a bewildered motorist.

All this needs to be kept in mind when we begin to wonder whether our civilization will not destroy itself through its own stupidities and hatreds. If there is this vast equipment of helpfulness, it must be because a good many people want to be helpful. It may be that this will-to-help is the genuinely enduring part of our human nature. At least it is something that we have a right to bank on.

But the kind of help-giving I have described, the help to be found in books, is only one small part of the story.

Perhaps the most basic and widespread help we give one another is through organized education. A school exists to supply human needs. Children have to know certain things; adolescents, other things; grown-ups, still others. Every center of education, from the smallest one-room schoolhouse out on the prairies to the most elaborately organized university in a great city, is man responding to man's various calls for help. Here again individuals spend their whole lives doing nothing but making themselves capable of giving assistance. The task of a teacher is none other than that. He chooses to be at the com-

mand of a human race that needs to know many things if it is to know how to live.

That we greatly care about this kind of help-giving is indicated by the fact that we voluntarily tax ourselves for the public support of education. However much we may question other taxes, we seldom question these. We have come to the point where we consider public education necessary to keep going the civilized society we want to have.

But it is not only in the areas of education that the help-giving spirit shows itself. A metropolitan newspaper takes contributions for a summer camp for underprivileged children. Another newspaper takes contributions for the hundred neediest cases. Associations of various kinds organize activities to meet the physical, mental, and spiritual needs of young men and women. Neighborhood settlements invite people, from youngest to oldest, to come out of their city loneliness and join together in doing the things that humans like to do.

One of the basic needs of every adult is to have a job. In modern life a young man no longer drifts into one, as did the farmer boy in the past. In these complicated days, his effort to find a job is frequently the most bewildering and disappointing of occupations. Hence the response in many quarters with a special kind of help-giver—the employment bureau. Sadly enough, an employment bureau is not always

what it pretends to be. It is frequently a shameless means of taking money and giving false promises.

Our human wish to help is shown by our disapproval of an employment bureau that thus deliberately takes advantage of those who are seeking work. We come more and more to believe that such a bureau should be free of all commercialism, so that people may go to it and be sure of honest help.

We might add instances of help-giving agencies—travelers' aid societies, nursing associations, public clinics and hospitals. These and scores of others exhibit man's will to be on hand where help is urgently needed. And even where the need is not so urgent, we organize help-centers: an automobile association that gives varied assistance, from towing a stranded car to laying out a plan for a trip across the country; an adult education council that gathers information about educational opportunities in the community; a town hall that serves as a center for the meeting of minds; a library that puts within everyone's reach the resources of the world's knowledge and culture; a church that gives people a chance to associate themselves in the pursuit of life's higher values.

We call for help, and we give help. The person who takes help without being willing to give it is a human parasite. The person who gives help without being willing to take it is a self-dramatizing egotist.

Each of us has to be both—help-giver and help-receiver. Life is not long enough nor strong enough for any one of us to stand on his own feet and be all that he has it in him to be. The evolution of social life points to an eventual togetherness of life, to what the biologists call a symbiosis—a living together, a mutuality of service and satisfaction. This, no doubt, is the kind of social life we are trying gradually to work out for ourselves.

It still comes hard, for the pull is strong in us to be busy first about our own affairs, to take for ourselves and to give to others only in small dabs and at infrequent times. But as we note the literally countless inventions we have worked out to help one another, we see indications that we are bringing the two basic necessities of our life together—of helping and being helped. Wherever the individual is both—a helper of someone, and one who is being helped by someone—he exhibits the genuine pattern of human life.

## CHAPTER IX

### WE CHECK UP ON OUR MINDS

OUT IN the West, where the roads run straight ahead for miles, the motorist can keep score on himself as a judge of distance. He can spot a stand of trees or a cluster of houses far away on the horizon, and can make an estimate of the miles to be covered before he reaches them. When he gets there, he can check himself by his speedometer. If the elevation is high and the air is exceptionally clear, he may find that he is badly out in his reckoning. Then he can try again and again until finally his estimates come nearer the mark.

What he soon discovers, in playing this game with himself, is that he has no God-given ability to judge distances. In fact, until he gets to be accurate by much practice, his guessing is a pretty fumbling affair.

However, man has one distinct advantage. He can check up on his fumbling. He has, in his car, an accurate mechanism which can tell him precisely how far he has gone wrong or how nearly he has been right. In fact, he has a double check. He may doubt his speedometer, but somewhere along the road he

will come to a measured mile. He can then watch how accurately his speedometer records distance.

This describes fairly well both the weakness and the strength of our minds. In themselves, our minds are not accurate about anything; but we know that our guesses are likely to be wrong and we invent devices whereby we can check up on ourselves.

A woman asks for a five-pound leg of lamb. Her eye runs along the pieces of meat hung on their hooks, and she selects what she thinks to be the five-pound one. The butcher, however, selects another. His eye has had more practice. But first he checks up on his own expertness by placing the leg of lamb on the scales. Provided the scales are true and he takes his hand off the meat, the report of the scale is a check both on the woman's inexpert guess and the butcher's expert judgment of weight.

These are simple and obvious checks on our judgment. We have them by the scores and hundreds. I add up a column of figures. If I want to be sure about the sum, I can add the column again and yet again. But if the column is a long one, and I am particularly clumsy at figuring, I shall probably do best to click off the figures on an adding machine. Instantly it gives me the correct sum—provided I have checked the correctness of the figures.

Check and double check—this is the story of the human mind in its efforts to achieve accuracy of judg-

ment. Where we can invent checks upon ourselves, we are left in no doubt. Where we can invent no checks upon ourselves, we are left in much doubt. Hence much of our human ingenuity is spent in finding out how we can keep our minds from being too unsafe in their judgments, how we can prevent them from playing too many tricks upon us.

For they do play tricks upon us—so many and in such grave circumstances that we frequently, with the best of intentions, make errors that are disastrous in their effects.

No one nowadays would entrust the building of a sizable bridge or the digging of a tunnel to anyone who merely guessed how to put steel girders together or how to pierce the earth. For the safety of all of us, we require an engineer, one who is trained to use all the scientific devices for securing, in every operation, complete accuracy. Nor would we choose an engineer because we liked his looks, or because he voted our party ticket or gave the best cocktail parties. These things, to our minds, have nothing to do with the job.

Knowing how likely the mind is to go wrong, we require a guarantee that the man who does the work will make every effort to keep a check on his own mind. In short, we do not trust the human mind in its untrained natural working. We trust it only when it has learned how to apply outside tests to itself.

Here are two men who are applicants for a me-

chanical job in a factory. The employer must choose one of them. He must select the one better fitted for the job. How is this judgment to be made? In former years, and frequently even nowadays, the judgment would be made by rule of thumb. The employer would look at each man, size him up, ask some questions about his past experience, read his letters of recommendation. Then he would make his choice.

As likely as not his selection would be made in terms of matters that were irrelevant. The man he selected might be the one who "caught his fancy." He was tall and blond, and this particular employer always liked tall, blond fellows. He disliked short, squat, dark ones. He had a vague notion that short, squat, dark ones were not good workers. Besides, the tall blond one had a splendid letter of recommendation, while the short, squat, dark one had a letter that merely said in a few words that he had been an excellent worker. The employer did not stop to study the letters of recommendation. He did not stop to consider that one might have been written by a person especially skillful in praising people, the other by a man of few but honest words.

Obviously such rule-of-thumb judgment is subject to all kinds of error. Hence the efforts of psychologists in recent years to invent checks upon our judgments. They have worked out "intelligence" tests.

An intelligence test might show that the blond man

actually rated lower than the short, dark one. He looked more intelligent, but looks can easily deceive.

Psychologists have also worked out tests of mechanical aptitude. Such a test might show that the blond man was clumsier with his hands, less ingenious in his mechanical powers, than the short, dark one.

If, therefore, the employer wants to be sure in his final judgment, he will have to start out by being doubtful of his first guess. He will have to be willing to pay no attention to "first impressions," will have to give up his pride in his supposed power to "size men up." He will, in sort, have to submit his judgment to the impersonal check-up of an objective test.

More and more we are able to do this sort of thing. As we become expert in doing it, we deceive ourselves less and less. The alert thinker is the one who avails himself of every possible means of correcting the inaccuracy of his personal judgment.

There is one area, however, in which most people still go blithely ahead, not only trusting their untested judgments, but inflicting them upon a world that needs accurate thinking more, perhaps, than anything else. It is the area of opinion.

We have all sorts of opinions—opinions on how to educate our children, govern our cities, carry on our businesses, run our railroads, handle unemployment, punish criminals, give workers a chance, give employ-

ers a chance, bring peace to a troubled world. Thus far, we have invented no checks as accurate as speedometers and adding machines, nor even as partly accurate as psychological tests, to tell us whether our opinions are simply our own pet prejudices or are judgments based on reality.

So we go about pronouncing opinions, unhesitatingly, dogmatically, and becoming furious when others have opinions that differ from our own. The fight of opinions is a sad mess in our world today, and it will doubtless continue to be so until we become trained in the art of checking up our opinions in whatever ways possible.

Are there ways? There would seem to be at least two. Neither has the complete accuracy of a mechanical device, but each is a way of submitting our personal views to relatively impersonal tests.

If one's opinion is about the education of children, for instance, there are open to him facts about child education that have been discovered by individuals competent to make investigations. If, therefore, he delivers an opinion, he is hardly justified in pressing it with much heat if he has not yet troubled himself to find out what facts are available.

No one, of course, would say that an individual should have no opinions until he has examined all the facts; but when a person has not even made an

effort to find out the facts he might at least be modest in his pronouncements.

This is a day when the great indoor and outdoor sport of Americans is to deliver judgments on matters political and economic. Pretty nearly every group has its opinionated member, who pounds the table or slashes the air with the complete conviction that he is declaring final truth. Is it too much to ask of such individuals that they take time out to read up, with exhaustive care, on the subjects they are so sure about? Just as there is no God-given power in us to judge distance correctly, there is no God-given power to judge correctly how to run a government or to organize a socially effective economic system.

If we are in doubt when we try to judge the number of beans in a jar or the weight of a horse, we ought to be willing to be in even greater doubt when we try to judge how taxes are to be imposed, or how the peace of the world is to be established. Someone can eventually count the beans and weigh the horse. But, as to the other matters, no one yet has the answers. We shall have to be modest, therefore, and, with the help of honest and equipped minds, try to find out as much as we can of what bears upon the matter.

This second means of check-up is the opinions of others. These opinions may be more unreliable than

our own, or they may be more reliable. In any event, if we give them the chance to confront our own opinions, we give ourselves the chance to have our lurking errors detected. Frequently we go along having an opinion while we are in complete ignorance of certain inconsistencies in our reasoning that we ourselves have never detected.

We have a way of fooling ourselves and never knowing it until someone points out our subtle self-deceptions. We rationalize; we think in circles; we draw conclusions when we haven't got enough evidence; we get caught by high-sounding words; we let our emotions get the better of our reason—in short, we make all kinds of mistakes we ourselves do not detect—no doubt because we cannot hold ourselves off at arm's length and see our folly. But other people can—or sometimes they can. So it is good to let other people hear what we have to say, and for us to listen to what they have to say about what we tell them.

This is no accurate test, but in regions where no one can be wholly accurate it is a test that every sincere thinker will gladly undergo. It is much like what the scientist does. When he thinks he has discovered something, he does not go into a huddle with himself and write a congratulatory letter to the world announcing the discovery. He puts it up to his fellow workers throughout the world, publishing in accu-

rate detail an account of the experiments he made and the results he achieved. Then he waits for what his fellow scientists will say. They will repeat his experiments. If they get the same results, they give him their approval. If, on the other hand, they do not get his results, he must take up the problem again, and try to discover how his errors occurred and how they can be corrected.

Discussing our opinions with our fellows, listening to their criticisms as carefully as we explain our own views, and being ready to correct our errors of fact or judgment is, therefore, a second way in which we can, in a measure, test ourselves. It is a test which at least saves us from living complacently with our self-deceptions.

To know that you do not know, said Socrates, is to be wise. We might put this into a modern version: To be accurately aware that your mind is inaccurate, is to be wise enough not to trust unchecked judgments. In short, it is to be wise enough to be skeptical of yourself.

To be self-skeptical is the beginning of self-wisdom. Most of us are skeptical of others. Too few of us are skeptical of ourselves. If we were, we should be less given to dogmatic pronouncements.

What we need, it seems, is some kind of ironic

spirit sitting in a corner of our brain, whose job it should be to remind us regularly that not all truth is contained in the compass of our minds. When we begin to make loud, angry noises, to saw the air with eloquent vigor, a ghostly ironic laugh would help.



## CHAPTER X

### WE MAKE THINGS IN OUR IMAGE

WE ARE always making the world in our image. We cannot help it. If we handle any sort of material at all, we have to handle it in terms of what is in us and of what comes out of what is in us.

Two carpenters work side by side. Each makes the world in his own image. One makes it in the image of a self that is skillful and painstaking; the other, in the image of a self that is clumsy and careless. In each case the self is stamped into the product. Two teachers teach in adjoining rooms. One is rich in the inner resources of his character, loves his work and loves youngsters. The other has a meager mind; he hates his work and hates youngsters. Can there be any doubt that the image of each is stamped into the human material with which each works?

We stamp our image in thousands of different ways upon thousands of different parts of our world: upon the job we do, the words we say, the gestures we make, the obligations we undertake; upon the charities we give or the mean actions we are guilty of; upon the people who are happy because we are alive, or the people who suffer because we refuse to die.

Each of these acts of ours is a part-image of ourselves. If we added them all together, we should get the full image we imprint upon our world. In this total image would be discovered the way we react to life, the values we value, the basic things we care about.

Two men sit side by side in the subway. One man likes people, believes in them, is confident that with all their follies they will manage some degree of sanity in carrying on their world. He has a warm affection for the universe that has given him the privilege of life. He cannot prove anything about it. He hears people say that it is an evil sort of universe that is careless of human good.

He is not able to prove that these people are mistaken. He simply likes his world; likes the way it gives him life, and is willing to take his chances with it. He believes that it has in it some strange power to grow increasingly lovely—this is the way he thinks of evolution, and he believes that he and his fellows share this power to evolve into something far finer than yet has been.

The man next him hates people, has no confidence in them, dislikes everything they do, and is sure that in the end they will smash up the stupid world they have stupidly made for themselves. He hates life, hates the world that gave him life, believes it is an

evil thing that cares neither for him nor for anyone else. He is willing to endure it but not to love it. When his life is over, he will be done with it all, and good riddance.

Two men side by side—but the meanings they create for themselves out of their human experience are worlds apart. These total meanings decide not so much what each man does—circumstances may determine that—but how he does it when he does it. Each will stamp his total self—his affection or his hatred, his confidence or his disbelief—upon his world.

Our world of man-made things—houses, gardens, books, schools, factories, libraries, prisons, warships—is not merely a world of things. It is a world that tells about people. It is a gallery of the portraits of people.

The individual who gets the habit of looking at the world in this way, as a gallery of portraits of people, is one who finds friendly things all around him.

He passes by a snug little Cape Cod cottage and has a warm feeling for the man who built it. Here was no boastful fellow, all set on big spaces and gorgeous display. Here was a modest fellow who wanted to make a place of quiet beauty where a family could live together in a setting of simple charm. Or he passes by a village school of the new type, austere and honest in its straight lines, yet beautiful in the

rhythm and proportions of its parts—a school with windows big enough to let in floods of light, and an entrance that seems to welcome the whole countryside of children. As he passes it by, he feels a human impulse there, the impulse of a whole community trying to do the best it can for children, to open up to them the best that searching minds have found of truth and rightness.

Or he passes by a prison, ugly with small, barred windows. He feels the shuddering companionship of man's terror—terror of the thief and terror of the murderer. He himself has these terrors. His own image is imprinted on the walls of that prison. And imprinted there, also, is the helplessness that he and his fellow men feel in the presence of man's still untamed impulses for evil.

He passes by a factory that makes, let us say, chewing gum. Again, a portrait of human beings: a whole nation of them chewing away, in contentment, or in nervous haste—a nation of people who have seemed to find that to keep the jaws at work is to keep the mind at rest.

Or he sees a warship in the harbor. Again the image of man, of man that sets up national boundaries, of man pathetically unable to settle his differences with those who live across the boundaries, of man powerless to renounce his weapons of power.

The story is told of a man who, after the Great

War was over, saw the repainted warships in the harbor of New York. The camouflage lines had been removed, and the vessels were again in their ordinary battleship gray. He looked at them with profound satisfaction.

"It's good," he said, "to see battleships once more the way God made them."

Rendering unto God what was not God's, he failed to see in the warships the portraits of people—and of himself among them.

Speaking broadly, there are two kinds of people: those who see the man-made world as things, and those who see that world as images of selves. The first see the world as things to conquer and possess. The second see it as people to live with and help live.

Let us look back at the village school. The person who sees it merely as a thing, may see it as a thing that enables him to sell otherwise unsalable property, and he may try in crooked ways to have the school built on ground he owns. Or he may see it as a thing out of which to make money, and he may try strenuously to get the building contract and then put in inferior materials to make a larger profit.

On the other hand, the person who sees the school as a portrait of man will see it as our human effort to do the best we can for our children. He will try, then, in honest ways to help make it a helper of chil-

dren. He will fight corruption in the school board that appoints poor teachers because they are family connections, or that misappropriates funds that should go to needed equipment.

This contrast of attitudes runs through the whole of our human experience. We can see government as an opportunity for power and graft, or we can see government as man's fumbling efforts to bring order and decency into his life. We can see a manufacturing business as an opportunity to put things over on people for our own advantage, or we can see it as man's ingenious effort to make the things that make life more livable. We can see finance as a subtle means of extracting profit out of other people's ignorance, or we can see it as the means whereby we can make the goods of life circulate more widely and effectively.

Two kinds of people—thing-minded and man-minded. The deepest conflicts in our life are between these two.

If we can see our world as a gallery of images of people we shall grow continuously. Our self will have new dimensions. The human individual comes into the world as an ego-centered infant. The world he knows is chiefly inside his own skin. As he grows into childhood and youth, he grows out increasingly into

a world of individuals more or less like himself. He has to learn to take these into account. But as he grows into maturity, he learns not only to take them into account, but to put himself at their service. Their desires and disappointments become increasingly his. He feels their needs, their ambitions, their pathetic hunger for approval, their defeats, and their awkward efforts to overcome their defeats.

The human maturity we have learned to care about is that which shows itself in a wide and responsive sensitiveness to life. We revere Christ because He had this sensitiveness. He cared about people—deeply enough to undergo bitter suffering in their behalf. We revere women like Jane Addams and Florence Nightingale because they, too, had this sensitiveness. They were not bounded by the narrow limits of their own selves and their own affairs. Their interest and sympathy went out to all mankind.

This seems to be the point toward which all that is genuine in our experience is heading. We are not made merely to survive for our own sakes, but to survive for the better survival of our fellow men.

The images of ourselves live on. Whenever we see a person doing to another what he would like to have done to himself, we see the image of Christ. We see His image wide-flung over the world, where people

gather in humble prayer or in sincere aspiration for human good.

Here is a lovely woman. If you know her well, you know that she bears the image of her mother—a mother who conquered long years of poverty by gayety and grit. The image lives on in the daughter.

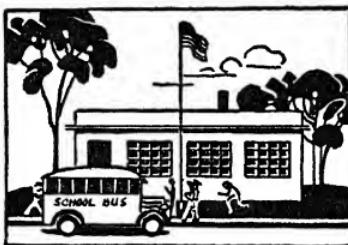
Here is a cocky little man, opinionated, always showing off his superiority. If you know him, you know that he carries about him the image of his father. His father dominated him throughout his youth. When his father died, the young man made up for the long suppression by putting on swagger. The swagger is the image of the father living on in the son.

The criminal at the dock bears an image—of a thieving father, perhaps, a stupid teacher, or a nagging mother. The college boy at his studies bears an image—perhaps of intelligent parents, perhaps of a Lincoln studying in his log cabin, perhaps of a Jefferson declaring the rights of man, perhaps of a Socrates discussing on the street corners of Athens. Perhaps all of these images and more live on in him and now make him what he is.

This power to imprint images of ourselves upon our world is the most sublime and the most terrifying of our powers. The images of ourselves are like genii of the Arabian Nights, let loose from the bottle. Once they are out in the world, they are beyond our power. They go ahead and do things that we ourselves never

thought of. They can do tragically evil things if the image is evil, grand things if the image is grand.

Obviously a man is not bound by his skin. He is all the images of himself that he imprints on all the minds of his world.



## CHAPTER XI

### KEEPING MENTALLY ALIVE

A MAN goes to his doctor. "No," he replies to the doctor's question: "I haven't any special pain—not that I can notice. Just have lost my zip. Food doesn't taste the way it should. Nothing tastes good. I feel washed out."

The doctor proceeds in the usual manner—tongue, pulse, chest; asks questions. Then:

"How long since you've had an examination of yourself?"

The man looks shamefaced: "Not so long as I can remember."

"Well, how about tomorrow morning?"

"That'll do for me."

"All right, come to the hospital at eight. Don't eat any breakfast, and we'll see what we can do for you."

At eight, the man is at the hospital, ready for what he expects to be a long-drawn-out ordeal of being thumped and probed and made generally conscious of his ailing body. He is told to shed his outer clothes and lie down on a couch.

"Take it easy for a while," says the attendant. "Go to sleep if you want to."

After what seems an endless period of waiting, the attendant comes back, puts clips on the man's nose, and a masklike arrangement over his mouth.

"Just breathe quietly—in and out."

The man does so. A few minutes pass.

"O.K.," says the attendant, and takes off the clips and mask. "That's all."

"All!" says the man. "I thought I was to be examined."

"You have been. Basal metabolism test."

The man gets back into his clothes. "Basal metabolism," he mutters to himself. "What the devil is that?"

By the time he next sees his doctor, he has mustered up courage enough to ask.

"That test, doctor. They didn't seem to do much to me. What was it all about?"

"Metabolism test. Measures the oxygen you take into your body—measures how much energy is being produced inside you."

"Oh! What was the report?"

"Showed you're a little below par. Nothing serious, however. It would be a good idea if you took a vacation."

The basal metabolism test is a triumph of medical inventiveness. In spite of its simplicity, it gives us clues to ourselves that are more revealing than the most long-drawn-out series of thumps and probings.

Thumps and probings tell us about special parts of ourselves, but the metabolism test tells us about our activity as total beings. With a scratch of a pen on a recording machine, it informs us accurately how well or ill our body produces energy from the food and air we take in.

It would be an equal, perhaps even greater, triumph if we could invent a test that would measure our mental metabolism and inform us how well or ill our minds use what we take into them.

"No, I haven't any phobias or obsessions," says a man to his psychological physician. "But I'm a bore. I bore myself and I bore my friends. They don't tell me so, but I see it in their eyes. What can I do about it?"

Or this other man says: "I've lost my mental pep. Used to have plenty of it. Now I'm just plain dull. My mind won't seem to click any more."

Or another: "I can't get interested in anything. I've reached a point where one thing is as good as another, and nothing is any good."

There are many people who would not even know if anything was wrong with their minds. They are the colorless people, who go through the routines of life, able to get by, neither adding to the wisdom and the gayety of existence nor subtracting from it—mental ciphers; or smug people, afflicted with what might be called fattening of the brain—satisfied with their place

in life, supremely content with themselves, unwilling to face any new experience that might force them to readjust; set people, suffering from what might be called a hardening of the brain—rigid, opinionated, dogmatic, unlistening and unyielding.

It would be a triumph of psychology if we could invent a way of putting such people—and many others who suffer from one or another of the forms of mind-deficiency—through a simple test so that they might know what was wrong with their minds.

There is no such simple test. When minds go bad and need to be restored to full activity, we can go at them only in roundabout fashion, by asking questions, probing into the subconscious, calling up memories of the past, trying to find out what queer quirks of circumstance or upbringing made them the way they are.

Then we fumble about for practical suggestions, venturing this idea and that, trying for something that will make the mind click into attention and start working once more. It is a long and costly process, too long and costly for most people to use. We need a simple test that will show us the total functioning of the mind, good or bad; and we have no such test.

Nevertheless, there is something about the basal metabolism test, above described, that might well serve as a clue to a possible way of discovering important things about the mind. For the mind, in its

basic processes, is not altogether different from the body. It takes in its own nourishment and forms of oxygen, in the experiences that come to it from the outer world. Like the body, it has to make use of these and change them into its own peculiar forms of energy, into thoughts, words, purposes, plans, activities.

If it takes in too little of its own necessary supplies it grows mentally and emotionally anemic, that is, bored, listless, dull. If it is unable to use what it takes in and change it into the energies of thought, expression, new purpose and new action, it develops various symptoms of suspended mentality.

The working of the body can be measured accurately. It is very difficult to test the efficiency of a mind because the many and varied forms of human experience are so mingled that we can scarcely separate one from another, or measure them accurately. Besides, there is no one form of experience that shows the efficiency of the mind as the use of oxygen tells of the efficiency of the body.

Nevertheless, by watching how minds behave, we can in a general way estimate whether they are getting their proper supplies. It is not difficult, for example, to notice whether a mind is living in a routine of sameness, receiving no new experiences to vitalize its energies, seeing no new people, going to no new places, reading no new books—or old books of the

kind that are always new—getting no new ideas. We can lay it down as a rule of the mental life that where there is insufficient intake of fresh experience, there will be symptoms of mental sluggishness, dullness, boredom. The mind will be anemic, listless, weak.

Again, it is not hard to tell whether the supplies taken in by the mind are being properly used and changed into mental energy.

For example, one of the frequent symptoms of mental old age is what might be called “neophobia,” the fear of what is new. The mentally old person is afraid of new ideas, new ways of doing things. He insists that the old ways were the better ways, that people are losing the sturdy virtues, the plain common sense they used to have.

We cannot be completely sure just what is wrong with such a mind. But it seems reasonable to believe that what happens is something like this: The old mind has lost the energy to adjust itself to new experiences; it is tired, worn out.

Being a human mind, it does not tell itself that it is worn out, incapable of meeting new experience as new experience should be met. Such a confession would be equal to complete surrender. It would be “giving up the ghost.” It would be like resigning itself to death.

The mentally old mind has to cling to the illusion that it is still mentally alive. It has to believe, there-

fore, that its thought-processes are going on as vigorously as ever. Hence, when new experiences come to which it cannot adjust itself, new ways of life, new ideas, new outlooks, all it can do is to build up defenses against them. In building up such defenses, defying the new ideas and denouncing them as evil, it seems to itself to be thinking with vigor and effectiveness, when as a matter of fact, it is merely pushing off the experiences it is too worn out to absorb.

This is the pathetic habit of mental old age, to oppose bitterly all that is new, because new things cannot be understood and accepted.

A different and less annoying symptom of mental old age is talking too much about the past. Again, we cannot be completely sure of our diagnosis, but it would seem reasonable to believe that endless and purposeless reminiscing takes place because the mind, being unable to absorb new experiences, is compelled to live upon the stock it has already gathered. It looks back because it has no longer the vigor to look forward. It talks about its past experiences because it has no strength left to be interested in new ones.

Sometimes the symptoms of suspended mental activity take the form of a complete rigidity. They may appear in a person of any age. The mind is fixed in its own opinions. The fixity may be cheerful. "If it was good enough for my father, it's good enough for me." "Yes, stranger, we don't hanker after none of

these newfangled ways." Or the fixity may be grim. It might take the form of persecuting those who hold views that are different, breaking up meetings, or casting people into jail.

Mental fixity may easily be a result of too little nourishment taken into the mind; that is, it may be a case of plain ignorance. A metropolitan club of well-to-do people recently turned down a suggested speaker because, as the chairman of the program committee said, "One of our members heard her give a lecture on Russian drama, and she praised it. If she likes Russia, she can go there. We don't want her."

Here was plain ignorance of a Russia that had existed many generations before the revolution that they feared and hated, and plain ignorance of the purpose and meaning of creative art.

Or the mind's fixity may come from the acceptance of something as a final truth. All forms of intolerance result from an unwillingness or an inability to let new facts endanger old convictions. To a person who is religiously intolerant, all disturbing new discoveries and new insights must be kept out of the mind. To a person who is politically intolerant, all ideas that question his own political creed must be instantly suppressed.

The intolerant person believes that he has reached a final stage of thinking, something that he calls "the truth," to which nothing can be added. But to feel

that one has reached a stage as final as that, means that the mind has stopped work. It has closed up shop and turned out the light.

There is no clear and conclusive test of these things —certainly no way of measuring exactly how far the mind is below, and what it must do if it is to bring itself up to, par. We can simply apply such rough wisdom as we have from our knowledge of how living things behave.

The mind has to do two essential things if it is to keep its vigor: It has to take in new experience, and it has to transform this experience into fresh thought, emotions, intentions, plans, and activities. When the mind stops taking in, it merely lives along on its past. When it fails to turn its experiences smoothly and effectively into new ways of thinking and doing and acting, it suffers a kind of mental poisoning, much as the body suffers poisoning when intake of food remains undigested. It is under such conditions that the mind becomes suspicious, fearful, opinionated, stubborn, cranky, bitter.

The mind, then, is no exception to the rule of all living things. It must work to keep alive, absorbing its world, transforming that world into its own peculiar energies.

There are more ways than one of dying. Many of us are dead, have been dead many years, before we are buried.

We die of what we eat and drink,  
But more we die of what we think.

But also, there are more ways than one of keeping alive. The mind that keeps renewing itself with fresh experience remains flexible and young. It has no clogged-up places, no dead areas. It opens its doors to the life stream and turns that stream into its own ever growing wisdom and power.



## CHAPTER XII

### ACHIEVING MENTAL MASTERY

**T**HREE are few things upon which human beings have widely agreed. One of the few is this: A Jack-of-all-trades who is master of none is a pretty sad specimen. He does not fit into the human picture in any way. He is the rolling stone that gathers no moss.

It is the destiny of each individual to begin life without any ability to do any particular thing well. The child kicks and squirms and slashes about. He cannot walk, cannot talk, cannot reach and grasp. He is a small bundle of nerves and muscles, all set to go places but not able yet to go.

The life process is one of mastering, one after another, certain abilities and the knowledge that is necessary in making them useful. The child learns to reach and actually grasp the object he aims at; learns to creep, then to walk, then to climb stairs; learns to change the meaningless sounds he makes into meaningful words; learns to wash his face, dress himself, feed himself. He learns to go to school; learns two plus two equals four, and c-a-t spells "cat"; learns that Columbus discovered America, and that Thomas Jeff-

erson wrote the Declaration of Independence. He learns to run with his gang and to fall in love; learns what a nickel will buy, and buys it; learns to want more nickels and to spend them.

It is a long road from the squirming infant, helpless in everything, to the mature human being, able to run his own life and join with others in the running of their joint life. It is a road that every normal individual travels between the time he comes into the world and the time he goes out of it.

Some, however, are shunted off the road, even in infancy. They are born with defective minds and cannot quite make the grade. All their life they remain infants, unable to master their muscles, to make articulate speech, to do the things that others of their age are able to do. As imbeciles and idiots, they go through the years, but the years do nothing to them. They die without having lived.

Others get shunted off a little later. They learn to do what children can do, but are unable to do more. Their minds are fixed at the child stage. As morons, they go through the years, but the years never carry them into full maturity. They die, having lived only a little.

These subnormal individuals are the most pathetic defeats of life. Some defect in their heredity pushes them off the road the rest of us travel. We hurry by, toward one satisfaction after another. They struggle

painfully along, but life continually crowds them off into the ditch.

Others move along the road of childhood and into youth. They learn the muscular skills and how to talk and read and write; they play games and go to parties; they recite from the textbooks; they graduate from high school, sometimes from college. They seem all set to reach full maturity, but something halts them. There comes a time when they have to achieve life's characteristic mastery—the mastery of a vocation. They have, in short, to learn to do something so well that through it they can be of use in the human enterprise of surviving.

They come to a place where the roads spread out in many directions: "Doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief." They have to choose. Having chosen, they must go ahead on that particular road and not turn back. This, apparently, is the life necessity: Find a work to do and stick to the doing of it.

These unfortunates choose, but are forever turning back. Going a short distance on one road, they are certain they have made a mistake. They turn back, or they cut across fields. They get lost. They hit another road and try that. It turns out to be the wrong road. They cut across more fields, get lost again. And so on, many times, while the years pass and they get nowhere.

These Jacks-of-all-trades are usually neither imbe-

ciles nor morons. They are the indecisive, the unable-to-make-up-their-minds. Something in their heredity, or in the conditions of their existence, has failed to give them the power to choose and to stick. They suffer what Masefield has called "the long defeat of doing nothing well." It is not a sharp, sudden defeat—one can recover from that—but a long-drawn-out defeat, of having nothing we can look back on with pride, and nothing we can look forward to with hope.

People flounder where they have no real mastery. For two things are essential to life—pride and hope. Where there is no pride, the individual is battered by the superiorities of those around him. He has no foothold in himself; nothing to give back for what he gets. He has no sense of worth, no sense that others need him and that he can be of use. Without a pride in something that one can do, the individual sinks to a zero.

Hope, too, is essential to life. For the human being can never completely lose himself in the present. The days and the weeks ahead are forever peering in. Hope is the belief that the days and the weeks to come will have something in them to make them welcome. But where the individual has nothing to look backward to with pride, there is little chance that he will have anything to look forward to with hope.

Pride and hope are made up of our masteries. We

can be proud of our handsome face—for a time. But if our handsome face hides a brain that is useless it is a pride that does not last long. We can be proud of our well formed body. But if our body is not able to do anything or make anything that people around us admire, the pride turns into humiliation. We are then just “no good.”

Life is a form of energy; and if we cannot energize we get, after a while, the feeling that we are only partly alive.

Life, also, is a kind of contract with other people. We know well enough that we cannot possibly go it alone. We come into the world through the help of our parents. We remain in the world through the help of the innumerable acts and interests and products of our fellow men. If we enjoy life we must at least do something in return for what others have done for us.

This, no doubt, is one reason why men and women go to pieces when by some accident of the business system they are out of work for a long time. They are removed from sharing in the joint human enterprise. They are unable to do their bit. They see the eyes of the others regarding them, pityingly perhaps, but also scornfully. They shrink out of sight, avoid human contacts. Even though they are not to blame, even though in their hearts they know they want to do their part but are prevented by forces beyond their

control, they harbor a deep shame. They are failures, bumming their way, taking but not giving.

The most basic pride is the pride of being useful. To be laid on the shelf is almost the same as being laid away in a coffin.

There is something vigorously sound about this feeling that in order to have self-respect we have to fit actively into the human enterprise. It shows how social we naturally are. Our energies must be woven in with the energies of our fellows. We have to make our contribution, even though it may be so small that no one gives it even a passing thought. Small though it be, however, there is a glaring difference between making it and not making any at all. No one may notice the small contribution, but when our hands are idle the whole world seems to turn reproaching eyes upon us.

Also, there is something steadyng about the ability to marshal our energies and concentrate them upon a piece of work. We then turn our attention away from ourselves, lose ourselves in what we are doing. This is the healthy human way. The opposite is the sick, neurotic way. When we are forever fussing about our health or worrying about our emotions, we are on the road that lands us in the doctor's office. The healthy human way is to turn the attention away from ourselves, to get absorbed in something we can do, something that can take its place in the world,

stand on its own feet, and be respected by our fellows. There is a psychological wisdom in the saying: He that loses his life shall find it. He that loses himself in a piece of work that is worth doing finds the kind of life that is wholesomely human.

The mind, therefore, has to go through the process of tightening up its powers. This is what learning means. Learning takes work. There is no such thing as being spoon-fed into knowledge. We spoon-feed infants; but as humans grow older we expect them to feed their own minds as well as their own mouths.

This means the discipline of effort. The mind has to sweat. It cannot sit lazily under a knowledge-tree and let the fruit drop into its lap.

That has always been man's dream of paradise, to do nothing and be happy in doing it. It is a dream, however, the wise among us have long since learned to surrender. When we are not wise, and grow particularly bitter about our need of working, we put the blame on Adam and Eve. They lost the family fortune. If they had only behaved, we might all today be living effortlessly in an earthly paradise. When we are particularly hopeful, we look into the future. We make an investment that will guarantee us an old age of complete and blissful doing nothing, or, barring that, we do the best we can to win the right to an eternal idleness in heaven.

There is doubtless a hidden wisdom in the old folk

tale of Adam and Eve. It is a wisdom so hidden that it is usually missed. Our forefathers, it will be remembered, ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Before that, they were ignorant. They simply did not know what life was like, and were blissful in their ignorance.

But having eaten of the tree of knowledge, they now were wise. Being wise, they could no longer live in the flabby state of idle ease. They had to get busy, for getting busy is the real way of life. And so, as the story tells us, they went forth to work by the sweat of their faces. They became man and woman.

It is only in our silly times of ignorance that we call work a curse. Worklessness, we now know, is the real curse, the inability to marshal our forces to a purpose, to bend our backs or our minds to a job that needs to be done. Work is the making of the man. A playboy is no man—even though he be fifty. He is merely a hapless human parasite or, perhaps better, an ungrown-up piece of human protoplasm. The genuine human being is one who has learned the happiness that lies in making effort and triumphing through effort.

If work is a curse, it is man, not God, that has made it so by changing it from a triumphant organizing of our strength for a purpose into a drudgery that has neither purpose nor triumph. A new story of man's loss of paradise might be written. There would be no angel of God with a flaming sword driving man out

of the garden, but a composite figure of the whole system of our economic inhumanity. This composite figure would be the human devil standing at the gates of life, driving defenseless man into the hell of purposeless and unhappy drudgery. And the story would not end with man's meek submission to his self-inflicted fate. It would have a further chapter in which man would rouse himself, return to the gates of life, drive out the devil of his own creation, and recover his right to work as the vigorous spirit of man needs to work.

So life that is healthy has to undergo its discipline. It has to labor to learn. It has to find the thing that it can do so well that it can be proud in the doing. It cannot spread over everything. It cannot, grasshopper-wise, go jumping from one thing to another, never finishing, never bringing anything to a point of triumphant accomplishment.

In the great shuffle of transmitted characteristics, traits, abilities, aptitudes, the man who fixes on something definite in life that he must do, at the expense of everything else, if necessary, has presumably got something that, for him, should be recognized as the Inner Fire. For him, that is the Gleam, the Vision and the Word! He'd better follow it. The greatest adventure he'll ever have on this side is following where it leads.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. A. Robinson, quoted by Hermann Hagedorn, in *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography*, page vii (Macmillan).

The happiest life is that in which our work is not only mastered but loved. Work that is drudgery is no proper discipline for the spirit of man. It is man made a slave by other men's desires. But in work that is a beloved mastery there are both discipline and love. We then are willing to sweat in the doing of what we deeply want to do. We undergo discipline because we know that without it we shall be merely flabby wish-thinkers. To succeed, we have to gird up the muscles of our mind and go to it with vigor and persistence.

We have our lives to live. In the long history of the race we have learned a little about how to live them. We know that to close our minds to what is around us is to live lives that are meager. We know that to do nothing to change the world around is to miss most of the adventure of living. We have both to accept our world and want to change it, to take it in and to take it in hand.

We know also that there is no stopping this side the grave if we wish to keep mentally and emotionally alive. We have to set goals for ourselves but never reach a final goal.

We know, too, that the world around us has fascinating puzzles that we can try to solve. We can enjoy discovering how the wheels go around. But we know, also, that it presents endless opportunity to us

to select what we please and create for ourselves our moments of beauty.

We know that human life has developed a rare quality of mutuality—of giving help and receiving it. And we know that we are at our best when we both give and receive.

We know that life is not all cakes and ale, that we have to be equipped to fight the things, and forces, and people, that endanger what is good in life. We know that at best our minds are not equipped as we should like them to be. We have to be honest enough to check their inaccuracies and presumptions, and to make them in truth the instruments of truth.

We know that we imprint on our world what we ourselves are. We make the world in our own image. It is not unreasonable, then, that we should seek to keep mentally alive, and alive with special vigor, in some field in which we contribute to the ongoing human enterprise.

We have our lives to live. Through all the ages men and women have been trying to discover how to live them. They have passed on to us some of their wisdom. We are not wholly ignorant of what should make life the way life should be. Nor are we by any means helpless in our effort to shape our lives according to that knowledge.

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